

A little dinner scandal

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A little dinner scandal

by [SrebrnaFH](#)

Summary

After a bad night and a whole day of chores, Mirabel is just so tired she loses the control of her tongue. Maybe, if she managed to stay silent, Isabela's engagement would have just gone through? She'll never know.

Notes

Disclaimer: My knowledge of Spanish is nil, same as my knowledge of Colombia. However, this idea popped into my head and I could not get rid of it, so I hope you'll enjoy the result ;)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Probably, had Mirabel not been that bone-weary and just plain annoyed, the entire engagement dinner would have gone much differently. Or maybe something else would have happened to stop the travesty going on in front of everyone's eyes, uniting the completely wrong people with each other. Maybe. Still, what happened was probably for the best, considering how intent Abuela was on her set goal of making her perfect granddaughter the wife of the most perfect man in town.

But, Mirabel *was* tired and annoyed and basically on her last legs by the time the Guzmans arrived, and it all started the moment the dawn broke.

Her room (nursery, not *her* room) felt weird with Antonio not being there. She kept waking up, listening in panic for his soft huffed breaths - and occasional mumbled words, since he used to speak in his sleep - and there was no sound. Each time it took her several minutes to calm herself down and remind herself sternly that her tiny primo was now living in the room Casita created for him. While she was stuck in the nursery, alone. Maybe waiting for another baby to come and scream their head off for several months, keeping her awake late in the night.

Maybe Isa and Mariano will produce perfect no-cry babies that will guggle quietly and be happy with everything.

Or maybe they will be perfect little monsters, like their mother.

Anyway, she was alone, in a silent room, where the only potential sound was the thudding of her own heart, and listening to that could only lead to her spiralling, because that always meant she was *lonely* and...

Well, she didn't get a lot of sleep.

The result was, she was less than active when setting the plates for the breakfast, she ate much less than she would have wished for normally and she could only half-heartedly make an attempt at talking to Luisa, who promptly disappeared on the road to the village.

"Try to not damage anything, Mirabel, if you *could*."

Abuela's voice cut through her thoughts as she was gathering the dishes.

"I was only going to help Mama..."

"Your mother doesn't need your *help*," her grandmother interrupted her with a sneer. "She works with her gift, and you..."

"I didn't know a gift was now required to wash the plates and scrub the pans."

She didn't manage to stop herself - or maybe she didn't really want to - and the surprised look on Abuela's face was totally worth it.

"Then I was planning on sweeping the kitchen and the courtyard, but if you have someone around the house with a gift for that, I will obviously hand over the broom to that highly qualified and probably more worthy person. Oh!" Mira's voice trembled, as she noticed everyone else turning towards her, "I forgot. I am the only one doing cleaning chores. Because *I have no gift*. Unless you wish me to ask Tonio's jaguar friend to lick the plates clean for us, it's still the useless little Mirabel washing them."

"You are forgetting yourself, child."

"You mean, I'm forgetting I'm the useless giftless hopeless Mirabel, as you so kindly remind me daily? No, I'm not. And you trying to accuse me of some... I even don't know what it is that you wanted. But hey, if I'm not supposed to help Mama, by *washing the dishes*, I suppose she will have to spend time doing that, instead of cooking and baking all the gift-filled food, but it will be good, because the useless grandchild will not be touching anything important, right...?"

She had the satisfaction of seeing her abuela do an about-face and march out of the courtyard, while Dolores and Camilo eyed her with something akin to respect. She forced down a wave of nervous nausea.

"I'll help you with the dishes," Milo suggested after a heartbeat.

She allowed her shoulders to sag, finally, from the defensive stance she held in front of Abuela.

"Thanks. Pick up the bowls and stack them by the sink. And get the cutlery, I'll put it to soak in boiling water..."

She was wiping off the second plate by the time Camilo gathered all the other crockery and fished the last fork from under the table. He leaned casually against the wall next to her.

"I've never heard you speak to her like this. What gives?"

She glanced up. He looked seriously interested.

"I just couldn't stand this rubbish anymore," she said finally. "It is... As if she was stomping on my toes in steel-capped boots. Every time I do anything apart from hiding in my room, she's on me like a hawk on a chicken. Some days it feels like I'm even breathing wrong. And *if* I hide, then I'll hear it during dinner, since it means I'm useless and being of no help to anyone."

Camilo nodded slowly, pursing his lips.

"I shifted into you one day, a few weeks ago," he admitted. "Just wanted to... Feel what it is like. Mind you, your eyesight is messed up."

"Tell me about it."

"Yeah, but other than that, I hadn't been "you" for ten minutes and I got chewed out by Abuela for *standing in the courtyard*, because she was walking by, and it annoyed her. Then

she proceeded to tell me how much I distracted her from whatever it was that she was doing - not that she was doing anything in fact, and I didn't even ask her for anything, I just *smiled*."

"Yeah. That tends to happen. I stopped smiling at her, she treats this as me taking up her precious time because my very presence forces her to remind me of the fact that I'm so useless."

"It's *all* messed up."

She shrugged.

"But, back to my original sentiment... You've never reacted before. Why today?"

She leaned on the sink, eyes intent on the dirty dishwater.

"Today I'm just sick and fed up," she whispered. "You know Tonio is afraid of sleeping all by himself in his room and asked me to move in there with him?"

"I can totally understand, it's a bloody jungle. Even though the animals supposedly obey him, how can he know if one of them secretly doesn't feel peckish and tries to snack on him?"

"Shut up, Milo."

"So, what happened? Did something eat your shoes, or whatever?"

"I wasn't allowed to be there with him," she said simply. "Abuela thought it would be unnatural to have me there. So, yeah. Back to the nursery with me, and, judging by his face at breakfast, Antonio has spent half a night awake and is probably ready to fall on his face right now."

"Again, messed up. Gimme these plates, I'll dry them off. So, last night was a last straw? Or that idiocy that we've just observed?"

She shrugged.

"Not sure... Maybe... Maybe I had enough much earlier, but I wasn't willing to mess things up before Tonito's ceremony. Maybe... I don't know, really. Or maybe it was the photo. Or..."

He stopped his movements, frowning.

"Ph-photo..." he stammered. "Wait. Photo. Oh, mierda, I thought you were behind me, but wrong blue, that was tia..."

She sighed, her shoulders slumping.

"...and she didn't wait for you to join, before she called for the photo to be taken. And she had to see you were missing, since she was in the back."

"Yep. Perfect family all in one picture, no lousy second-rate Madrigals here, no sir."

"Mira."

"What. Speaking pure truth."

He wiped off the last plate and moved her aside, picked up the large brush and started scrubbing the slowly emptying sink now clean of debris.

"You know what..." he started. "Wanna go and..."

"Camilo! What are you doing!?"

"Helping tia Julieta," he answered easily, without turning his head. "I hope you don't mind I'm not shifting into someone else for that."

Abuela's eyes narrowed as she moved her focus from him, to Mirabel, to the stack of washed dishes, to the yet-unswept floor.

"Senor Gonzaga needs some help on the upper pastures and the sheep are terrified of Luisa. Go and help him, and check which rams have the best wool this year. We'll need to pick which ones to breed next season, to get the quality up."

"Si, Abuela, but..."

"No buts. I don't want to hear any buts. We need to make sure that the herd is healthy and strong and that the best traits are preserved."

And with that she turned around and strode away, not listening to her grandson's explanation.

"What's wrong?"

Camilo leaned on the sink, now him looking into its white, sudsy insides.

"I hate sheep," he said slowly. "I hate how they look at me, I hate how they smell, I hate the feel of fleece on my fingers, I hate the oil that's covering them..."

"Lanolin."

"Whatever that is, I hate that, too. If it's sheep related."

"That's the grease they produce."

"Then I hate it from the bottom of my soul. And I don't know anything about wool or fleece or how to say which ram has the best one and I'd rather not come within ten feet of any ram, if I can, because they are vicious dumb creatures. So there. Alright, I need to wash my hands and do that. Even though if next year lambs are born with stringy wire instead of proper wool, I'll not be the one responsible for that."

"No, Abuela will be," she handed him the towel to wipe off his hands. "But they won't."

"Why...?"

"Because I'm coming with you."

"But Abuela..."

She rolled her eyes.

"I don't care. I need air, I need exercise and you need *me*."

"But..."

"I know fleece, and wool and all this stuff. And I don't mind sheep. You should take the workshop gloves with you and keep them when you shift. This way you'll have the needed form, and you won't have to touch them."

He considered that and picked up the heavy-duty gloves as they passed by the shed.

"And what next?"

"I'll pick the rams that are the best for next season, and you do the heavy lifting or whatever is needed. This will allow us to finish quicker..."

They climbed up the steep grassy slopes, making plans for the afternoon. It was strangely liberating to just chat like that, not minding whoever might be nearby and listening to them.

Once they got there, the task that needed Camilo playing a body double turned out not to be a lot, in fact, for such a serious trip. Getting a few of the older ewes to submit to parasite countermeasures (Camilo-as-Senor-Gonzaga was needed to keep them immobile, while Senor Gonzaga himself poured the medicines down their throats), holding a handful of more energetic ones down for a cleanup shaving (Camilo held and made disgusted sounds, just like Mirabel predicted) and other minor helpful activities. In fact, checking for the quality of the wool took longer in total than the entire operation with medicines, and by the time Mirabel managed to get her fleece checking done and point out the rams that should be used for breeding next year, Camilo had already shed the helpful gloves and was looking himself all over for any stray dirt.

"So, do we have a chance that next year lambs will be not covered with a dish scrub quality of wool?"

She rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, and this is actually something Abuela *should* have told *me* to do, because I'm the only one in the family who actually works with wool."

"Apart from fondling sheep sides?"

"Camilo. No, I spin. And weave."

"You *what* and *what*?!"

"Spin the yarn and weave cloth. I'm not very good at doing designs yet, so I mostly focus on getting stable plain weave done, and then I embroider... Why are you looking at me like this?"

Camilo was standing on the path, arms crossed, looking at her weirdly.

"You spin. And make fabric."

"Yep."

"And I didn't know about it."

She shrugged.

"You could have had? The afternoon classes at school are open for everyone, even these of us who managed to get done earlier than others, like I did. And Padre Humberto mentions them every other Sunday, really. You could have gone and had a look at the list of workshops..."

"No, what I mean..." he sighed, as if lost for words. "I mean, we used to know everything about each other. Like, until, what, two years ago?"

"We used to hang out more, indeed. But when they moved Antonio to my room..."

"Nu-uh. It's not *your room*, and that's also what's messed up. They should have given you one of the guest rooms *or* have Antonio stay with our parents until the ceremony. Because as it is... It looks like you're stuck as a forever kid."

She stopped herself from snorting.

"And Abuela treats me as if I was stupider than Antonio, only because he has a gift. Yeah. Don't think I haven't noticed, just breakfast was quite enough. Well, we'll see soon how happy she is without me around the house to be shouted at all the time."

"Mirabel...?!"

"After my sixteenth birthday I can move out and pick up apprenticeship."

Camilo rubbed his sternum for a moment, thinking.

"Senora Thea takes in students...?" he asked, uncertain.

"She promised to keep a spot for me, since she saw my work. I'd have to learn to sew more complex clothes with my machine and to make embroidery patterns, for others to be able to repeat my work. And to work to an existing pattern, if ordered to. And a bunch of other things."

"If you'd move out... Where would you live?"

"A room above the shop, so I'd have an eye on things and opened the shop in the mornings, too. And she'd pay me allowance and feed me or pay me more and not feed me. If Mami

would still consider feeding me at home an option, I'd earn more."

"Damn. You have an actual plan."

"I'm not going to wait around for Senorita Perfecta to complain about me being in the way the next time one of her hairs is crooked when she wakes up, or for Abuela to run me off from another family festa. I'm leaving by myself, on my own conditions."

He snorted.

"Take me with?"

"I'm afraid that you belong in Casita, Milo."

She found herself hugged ferociously.

"So do you. And the adults should see that. What they are doing is *stupid*."

"If they see the light before my next birthday, I'll consider changing the direction. But after what I saw yesterday... I might not be that welcome in the house anymore."

"Mira?"

"Let's say that I don't expect Antonio to be able to hold on to his gift much longer," she said slowly. "You've had ten years with yours, he may have... days."

Camilo stopped her on the path, concern visible in his eyes.

"What are you talking about?" he whispered.

"The miracle may not hold forever. She knows it, abuela. She just doesn't want to acknowledge it."

"How do you know it?"

"Luisa's powers seem to be giving out. And I've seen the house actually covered in cracks. Managed to get my hand sliced on one of the shingles, Mami healed it later. And all the doors kind of... flickered weirdly."

He nodded, jerkily, slowly.

"I'm not using my powers all the time," he began. "But Luisa and Dolores are, so they should feel the moment something goes down."

"Actually, it's mostly Dolores. Luisa is pretty strong just by herself, so in case of something big-but-still-normal she may not be using the Gift."

He nodded and started again down the path.

"And you just believe me, like this?" she asked, slightly annoyed.

"Why wouldn't I? You never told *tales*, unlike some of us. You told things, things that you've seen or done or heard of, but the only made-up stories you've ever told were when we were small and when Tonito got dropped into your room one day. AND you'd never wish to interrupt his evening, that much I know."

She sighed.

"Thank you. I mean..."

"Abuela doesn't believe you, so she won't help. I'll help you, whatever it is that is happening. I should have stood up to Abuela before, but with Tonito's ceremony looming..."

"I think keeping it calm before the ceremony is what everyone was focused on. For me, it was bad either way, but admittedly, if he did not get his gift, Abuela probably..."

"Would have blamed you," he finished for her, when her voice faltered.

"Yeah."

She sat on the boulder on the side of the road, kicking her feet against the cool stone.

"We should be getting back to the house, but... I kind of like it here. Far from everything, far from stuff happening, far from," she sighed. "Far from being alternatively shouted at and insulted."

He dropped onto the stone next to her and hugged her.

"But we have to go, or she will have an actual reason to shout," he suggested. "Let's not give her a legitimate reason to today, hm?"

Mira nodded, but still sat on the stone.

"What do you think they will say? Your parents, for example?"

"About what? You blowing up in Abuela's face like a forgotten firework?"

"No, about me moving out."

He made an uncertain gesture.

"I wish I could tell you Mama would be deeply affected by your absence."

"But since Antonio got his gift..."

"I'd say, she will only mind as much as Abuela makes it a problem. Papa will be happy that you're happy, since he thinks everyone should find a way for themselves. But he won't argue with Mama or with Abuela, unless they turn nasty..."

He trailed off, but Mirabel knew that tia Pepa tended towards moody and sharp, when faced with something unexpected.

"Well, can't be helped. Let's go down and see if there is stuff that needs doing before the distinguished guests arrive. We can't have Isa-perfect-bela have a disappointment today, after all."

Camilo leaned on the boulder for several more seconds.

"I wonder if..."

"Hm?"

"Just... Something Isa said once, she probably didn't notice me. Abuela was singing Mariano's praises so much and when she left, Isa just mumbled "I wish he'd get spots, she wouldn't be pushing him on me that much" and that..."

"Doesn't sound like a happy expectant betrothed-to-be?" she asked slowly. "Which is not good, if she is getting the offer officially today..."

"Because if she is, that means Abuela, and senora Guzman had already made the deal."

"Which means Isa practically can't reject him."

"That's a sucky way to get engaged."

"Miercoles."

"I'd say so."

"So, why isn't she protesting?"

"Dunno. I mean, Abuela isn't pressing anyone at me, luckily, but she did ask a few times about the girls in town, and I had to work really hard on getting out of the discussion about their smiles and money and families and so on. So..."

"It might be hard to tell her just plain 'no' if she is already so invested in it," Mirabel ended this with a sigh. "I can imagine that if she had shown up with a ready-made boyfriend for me, I'd have a pretty hard time getting rid of the guy, especially if his family was also very much for it. And I'm not her beloved estrella, so she wouldn't be keeping a princely hunk like Mariano in store for me, rather some frog-alike one."

"Princely hunk?" Camilo choked on a laugh. "What?"

"Hey, I'm just saying, he's a catch, and I mean..." she stopped by one of the last trees above the house. "I mean, if he was ugly or nasty, it would make it easier to tell Abuela no. But he's nice, handsome, reasonably smart, considering he's the guard captain. And these muscles don't hurt either."

"And he's very respectful towards his elders," Camilo provided. "And probably, if Abuela and Senora Guzman had set it up, he is going along with it..."

She thought for a moment.

"Do you think he's OK with it, though? I mean... is he actually willing to offer for Isa because he loves her, or is it more of 'she's pretty, makes flowers and anyway mama already closed the deal' situation?"

Camilo leaned on the trunk next to her, pouting in thought.

"No idea, but I don't think he really knows Isa at all. Not like Mama and Papa knew each other. I haven't seen them talk more than like five times, even in public..."

"My parents had known each other for years before they started to consider anything, and Mama already knew what kind of a man Papa was by the time he even brought first flowers for a date with her. And they *dated*, Isa and Mariano didn't..."

"I thought we were through with arranged marriages in this day and age," he shook his head. "Anyway, vamos. Probably someone is looking for us. We can think about it more as we clean."

And clean they did, because their mothers saw their early presence as a blessing from heaven and used their combined chore-doing capacity to deal with a variety of issues all around the house, from Mirabel sweeping old petals and straw away to Camilo doing some quick dusting along the taller shelves, using some of their taller neighbours as a template for his shift.

By the time lunch appeared on the table, they were both dirty, weary and very hungry, and have collected a multitude of scrapes and scuffs. At Mama's order, they washed their hands and faces to be allowed at the table, and each of them got an immediate arepa for their pains, which they chewed on gratefully, feeling the tiny injuries disappear, but then...

"Mirabel! Go and wash up this instant! I will not have you sit at the table looking like a dirty broom!"

Everyone froze and looked at her. Even though she had given her hands and face a thorough scrubbing at the sink, Abuela was looking at her with eyes that were drilling holes in her face.

"Mama, let her eat when it's all hot..."

"No, Julieta. She should know better than to show up at the table looking like this. After an entire day of rolling around in dirt or whatever it is that she did today. She should be ashamed of herself."

"Sweeping and mopping the courtyard," Mirabel said faintly. "And dusting the doorframes, and the bannisters, and washing all vases to remove any stray dirt that might have overflowed from them. And I've given a beating to all the doormats in this house... But I dearly hope I don't look like one."

Silence was so perfect, she could hear rats scuttling along the walls of the house.

Is this what Dolores always hears?

Abuela's lips were a tight line. A pale, thin line, bloodless and lifeless.

"Go to your room," she ordered. "You will not eat a meal with us until you apologise."

What she felt at that heavy pronouncement wasn't dread or any kind of worry. Maybe a dash of sadness, but still, not much. A drop of disappointment, but not a big one. She opened her lips...

"As if she can," Camilo snorted.

"Milo!"

"What? I'm just saying. Mirabel doesn't have a room. You can't order her to 'go to her room' if she never had one."

"Stop prattling, Camilo. She does have a perfectly good room!"

"Actually, she's stuck in our old nursery, and it isn't 'her room', by any means," he ignored his Mama's hissing. "Does she have privacy there, does the door lock? No. Does she have her own wardrobe, the size for grownups clothing? No. *I* have more space for my clothes than she does, and I need like one shelf, maybe two. Her bed is too short for her, she has one stupid bedside table, the same as we had when we were babies. And she has had to share with a toddler for the last two years. How fair is it?"

Her eyes filled with tears - painful, but grateful, too.

"Milo, you're making her cry, stop it," Tonio scolded.

"No, I'm just telling the truth. I mean, should she be grateful she's no longer sleeping in a crib? Or that she doesn't have a mobile above her pillow? You can't say it's her room unless you actually make it hers, and not just... allow her to remain there."

"Camilo, you're overstepping..."

"How? By speaking up for Mira, when you're trying to... to... exclude her from the family?"

She heard his voice choke.

"I'm doing what's *right* for the family!"

"Well, I don't think telling my prima to leave the table after she had been working her hands off for half a day is right by anyone!"

"Camilo! Go to your room, right now!"

He pushed his chair away with a nasty screech and calmly, looking his abuela in the face, collected a plateful of food in his hands.

"Oh, sure, I will. Mira, come on. I need your help with something."

"Milo..."

"Come. Take your food and let's have a lunch in my room."

Abuela said something angry, but all she could see was her primo, leading her upstairs, to his room, shaking as a leaf all that time. The moment she pushed the door closed, she saw him slumped over the table on the side, food in a heap in front of him. He was heaving deep breaths, as if barely holding it together.

She quickly dumped her lunch next to his and pulled him into a hug. Felt him shift, then again. And again. Finally settling into something familiar, as her own hair brushed her face now.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I needed... Some additional distance from that."

"Is this like a double hug for you? Me hugging you looking like me?"

He laughed weakly.

"Kind of. Yeah, sorry, I shouldn't be using you like this, but..."

"Hey, hey. If you need it, you can. No worries. Now, what was that?"

He shook his head.

"I'm not sure, but I just had that thought, that if I can't speak up even in such an obvious case like your stupid room, how can I ever expect myself to stand up to her in anything less straightforward? And yes, I know your bed is too short. It's been too short for you for two years, and you've never told your parents, right?"

She turned towards the table.

"Didn't want to worry them. Like I'm complaining about something that stupid. I once tried asking for a desk, but Abuela shot it down with a look, Mami never even heard the end of my question. Thank goodness I have that old table for my machine, since I can't very well use it on the floor!"

"Why is she so intent on keeping you cooped up, I'll never get. If she wants you out of the house, she should give you a chance to find something for yourself out there. If she wants you to stay, she should start treating you like a human being...!"

"I think she wants me miserable and under her total control. Like everyone else in our generation..." she stopped with an arepa halfway to her mouth. "Like... everyone else... Milo. Milo, Milo, Milo. She's putting her total control over everything we do."

"Ordering us around is kind of obvious."

"No, no, no. I mean, look at us. She's sending you to do probably useful things, but never giving you enough information to just work on the problem by yourself, right? You can't prepare, it's all on her. Dolores is *told* to eavesdrop on others. So Abuela is making her into

the town gossip by exploiting her gift. Isabela is..." she found it hard to say, but it needed saying, "Isabela is forced into being Miss Encanto, whatever else she may wish for. I don't... I don't even know *what* my sister actually wants. Not to mention Luisa, who is basically the single person in town doing any harder physical work some days."

"And she's ordering Mama to water the crops or whatever, making her force herself to be happy or sad at a whim. And making your mama work herself half to death for the community, and denying her your help, just because she's so..."

"Stubborn. And I'm the black sheep, the whipping girl for her moods."

They looked at each other in trepidation.

"I'm pretty sure if the two of us can see that, others can too," he offered hesitantly, shifting back into himself. "No?"

She shook her head.

"Look what it took us to just break through to that. And we're the ones getting the short end of the stick here. Others probably didn't feel it that way yet, because they get praised when they get to the objective she sets... Is it her gift? Managing everyone to make them miss the signs of her... dictatorship?"

He sighed and wiped his hands off, picked up an empanada.

"Maybe. She is like a general or something. Anyway... Do you think Isa wants to marry the cute captain?"

"I think she will do anything to keep Abuela off her back. That includes getting engaged to a guy that looks like a better-muscled version of Abuelo Pedro."

Camilo actually choked on that and required a thorough thumping on the back to get him breathing again.

"Mirabel!"

"What? Too hard?"

"No, I mean... About Abuelo?"

"Haven't you noticed? OK, I've only just really thought about it, so, fine, but isn't it right? Look at them. Abuelo on the picture is kind of thinner, but other than that, Mariano could be a cousin of ours on the male side. If we had any family on that side, that is."

He hopped up to stand in front of one of his mirrors and quickly shifted into Mariano. Then, with a grimace, into Abuelo Pedro. Quickly again into Mariano.

"Damn it, you are right. Abuela is pushing our own Abuelo's look-alike at Isa..."

"And everyone who knew her back when always says that Isa looks just like Abuela did when she was a girl."

He clicked his tongue.

"Which means Abuela is what, trying to redo the whole thing, by getting the perfect match in the younger generation?"

"No matter what the sides of that match may think," she added. "Mierda."

"Can we do anything about it?"

She sighed.

"Let's eat, then we go out and finish the cleanup. By the way, do I really have any dirt on me? I mean, she did see something..."

"Yep, you have some spots of dust on your shirt. It's enough if you just shake it off, yeah. That's that."

She bit into another arepa, comforting herself with the feeling of warm food in her stomach.

"She can't stop us from doing chores," Milo added between his bites. "I mean, if she tells us off for doing the needed work, she's basically showing her hand, telling us off for being alive. And I don't think she's ready to do that with me yet... And if she pushes too hard, our parents may actually snap. Like Tio Bruno did."

"What?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure, but from what I've heard from well-informed sources, they had a shouting argument just days before he left. Not sure what about. So. Maybe she doesn't want to push either of our mothers to do the same."

"Would be a bad thing for the image of the family in town," she mused. "Let's see what we can do to help our mothers then. Keeping our image as the good, helpful children we are."

They did. And both tia Pepa and Mama watched them for the rest of the afternoon with weird faces, but never said anything. Although, she had seen her father leave the nursery, holding a measuring tape in his hand, his face grim.

At least that can be confirmed by hard numbers.

Thank you, Camilo.

She scrubbed the serving dishes and the copper bowls, and the copper pan, and the iron pan, with her hands in sudsy water all day, musing about the potential of the lanoline from the sheep to coat her skin against all the wrinkling. And, occasionally, allowing her thought to stray in Isa's direction, trying to work out whether her sister would be more grateful or more furious, should *something* happen that would prevent Mariano from proposing.

I can live with her being mad at me, it's not like she isn't, daily. Will I be able to watch her get married against her will and stuck in a loveless match forever?

She sighed into the sink.

"No, I won't."

"Mira? What is it, querida?"

He mother's fingers brushed away her curls.

"Just debating myself, Mami. No worries."

"Hm. You and Milo definitely got better holding an argument than you were ever before."

And that sounded like... approval?

"Mami..." she started. "Would you... I mean, I need your advice on something."

"Ah. Speak, my child, I will share my wisdom. Is it about boys?"

"No, Ma..."

"As if she could ever get a boy to look at her twice," Isabela snorted. "Don't even say such a joke, Mami."

"Isabela! That's not a way to speak about your sister! Also, not true."

"That's what abuela says," Isabela shrugged and rolled her eyes. "Anyway, I wanted to ask, since Mariano likes that... Um, what was that..."

"Arroz con leche," Abuela provided from her spot by the door.

"Yes. Can we have some?"

Mami sighed.

"Very well. Just fetch me the ingredients from the pantry, I have to watch the cooking here."

"Mirabel can do that," Abuela ordered quickly. "Even she can't mess up something that easy."

She saw Mama close her eyes for a moment.

"I asked Isabela to do that," she said firmly - with maybe a bit of a shake? "Since she came with the request now, she should do some work for it. Mirabel is full busy with washing, and she will have to wash all the pots, including the one for the rice, too, so she needs to deal with the things that are waiting now. She will not be fetching the ingredients, especially not with her hands wet. Isa, get the rice, medium-grain, and sugar, and cream..."

"Julieta."

Mami turned her back to her mother and leaned over the stove.

"I'm cooking. Mira is washing dishes. We're both busy," she said in a strained voice. "Either Isabela fetches the rice and other things, or the dessert will be torta negra, because that's what we agreed on earlier and that's what we've already baked! Just like we agreed!"

Mirabel flinched at the broken, high note in Mami's voice, but she turned back to her washing, just in case Abuela decided there was something wrong about the way she scrubbed the baking sheet.

Isabel finally did fetch the ingredients, only after being reminded five times what they were, and left the kitchen with a huff of a person thoroughly put upon, mumbling about cooking smells in her hair.

"It's her own engagement dinner, why isn't she more involved?"

"Camilo, for heaven's sake! You almost made me drop this glass..!"

"Lo siento, tia. But really. If it was Dolores getting engaged, she would be here, fretting and helping since dawn."

Mami looked between them, then gathered them into a sudden hug.

"Thank you both for doing this, alright? We'll talk about it later, but yes, it is unfair, to both of you. But let's get this evening over with..."

They nodded and ran back to their jobs - Camilo cleaning out a stubborn spot on the table and Mirabel polishing a sooty pot.

It all only ended with Dolores alerting them to the arrival of the Guzmans - with the weirdest face Mirabel had seen her make, almost as if she had a toothache. They both ran to their rooms to change into fresher clothes, since they were, at that point, both rather grimy.

Dolores caught Mirabel's hand, before she could close the door.

"Pick your clothes and bring them to mine before you change."

"But..."

"I have my own bathroom. You can wash there quickly."

Oh. That was nice.

She nodded, sharply, and picked up her dark blue skirt and pale aqua blouse that was covered in heavy layer of flower embroidery.

"Come on," Dolores ushered her in. "Towel, soap. And let me help you with your hair..."

It was very nice. Instead of having to use the common bathroom, which nobody else was using in fact, but which was... less than glamorous, Dolores let her into a room intended for

comfort of the person using it.

"They are still like twenty minutes of a walk away, so you have a time for a shower and to at least get the worst dust out of your hair. Go, go, go."

And once she was done, Dolores helped her to get herself presentable, with a neat trick or two. She would have never thought to cover her hair with a scarf like that, but it was a perfect solution when she didn't have the energy to actually manage it properly, and twenty minutes was barely enough time to wash off the grime and dry it out to some kind of order. In her collection, Dolores had a pretty white headwrap which matched the rest of Mirabel's ensemble. The new hairdo made her feel suddenly *different*.

"This will keep the hair out of your face, at least for the evening, so you don't have it all the time in your glasses. Yep. That looks... Wow. Grownup."

And she felt so. Even though she also felt really, really tired.

"Thank you, prima," she sighed. "I mean it."

"De nada. And in the future, you can always come here, too. And..." her prima looked slightly hesitant. "I mean. Each of us got a... a room like a castle inside, right? It doesn't seem right that they've kept you in the nursery. But... Abuela..."

"I know. I know, don't worry, Doll. I'll live with it."

"But you shouldn't *have to*. I mean, seriously. I have nearly a palace here. And I'm all alone, so... Maybe, if you feel like it, and they can't get their act together," she stopped again. "You could move here. Move in with me."

"Doll, no, I can't. I make too much noise."

Dolores laughed, slightly sadly maybe.

"I need sound, some. And you're the second quietest person I know of in the world," she added looking away.

"And who is the first?"

Dolores jumped, slightly.

"Me, obviously. Anyway. We can have your things in here in seconds, and I'm pretty sure I can get casita to cough up a bed that will fit you..."

That did sound tempting. And going against Abuela's wishes, too, so it had additional value.

"Thank you, prima," she smiled. "I'll consider it seriously."

Dolores hugged her, just for a moment.

"It would be good to have you here. Not so lonely and..."

She hugged her back, silently, waiting for whatever Dolores was trying to say.

Unfortunately, someone knocked on the door.

"Oh," Dolores jumped up. "Abuela is asking for us. Come. And please, think about this. I could use some company, especially after today. It wouldn't be good for me to stay alone, I think."

What was THAT supposed to mean...?

They stopped on the balcony, for a split second, and Mirabel could see the way Dolores's face went through a series of painful expressions. She made the same grimace as during any fireworks, but this time it was at the sight of their guests.

"Doll," she turned to her prima quickly. "What's wrong? Do you know anything bad about him, or his mother? Anything that would be bad for Isabela?"

Dolores shook her head, eyes blinking quickly.

"N-no," her prima coughed. "No. He's a good man, a good son. Obedient son. He wants a family, he wants children, he spends his evenings quietly, reading and writing poetry. Sometimes he recites it during the night, when he can't sleep."

"Poetry. Our guard captain."

"Everyone can have a hobby."

"Yeah, but I don't think Isabela is a particular fan of poems."

"She isn't. It's something we always disagree on. Well, she will have to cope. I would..."

Mirabel turned towards Dolores on the stairs.

"Doll? You...? And him...?"

"He never... I've always been, kind of."

"In love with him."

Her prima nodded jerkily, turning away, her eyes firmly shut.

Against tears.

"Mierda. Alright, let's go and survive this dinner."

And survival was what they could only aim at. Nothing more. Abuela gossiping with Senora Guzman, Mariano stiffly sitting next to stiff Isabela and everyone at some stage of catching on that things are not what they seem (as in: Mirabel knowing/guessing about both Dolores and Isabela's issues, others having partial knowledge, down to Tonito, who knew nothing, but was nervous due to the tension).

"What are you wearing, Mirabel?"

Abuela's sharp voice made her look up - and everyone to look at her suddenly.

"My blue blouse," she answered simply.

"And why does it look like... A craft exercise?"

She looked down.

"Because I experimented with various styles on it?"

"Stop trying to take attention away from Isabela," Abuela just hissed. "Now, Senora Guzman," she turned to her table neighbour. "How do you like the dessert? Isabela herself made sure it was ready for you, since she knows it's Mariano's favourite."

Was that a grimace on perfect Mariano's face? It was, indeed.

A guess? Mariano doesn't like arroz con leche.

She looked at Dolores, who shook her head minutely.

Doll probably knows best what he likes. She probably knows his preferred way of taking coffee, his favourite afternoon drink when he's out with the boys, what he orders in the inn and what he eats to make his mother happy but secretly hates.

She moaned internally, but managed to keep a placid face, listening to everyone and trying to work out some way to end the torture they were experiencing. Her eyes met Camilo's across the table, and he was visibly suffering the same as her.

"Camilo, stop slouching," Abuela ordered sharply. "Mirabel, what are you doing?"

"Eating, I suppose..." she looked up, trying to sound innocent and just-minding-her-own-business.

"Try making less noise with it."

She allowed her fork to rest on her plate again, her throat suddenly too tight to even swallow. Not even her Mama's calming hand on her back could help her in any way. And not even a "Don't worry, abuela is just a bit nervous today" did. She just shook her head and sat there, worrying and feeling more and more tired and alienated with every sentence. Camilo stopped eating too, and was obviously going through some internal discussion, since his face was going through these microshifts that happened when he was rehearsing something in his mind.

"...such beautiful, healthy children, so strong, and handsome! Best of both of them... Camilo! If you can't behave properly at the table, you can actually leave. The same for Mirabel, I can't have you two interrupting everyone else with your behaviour."

Several things happened nearly at the same time.

Tia Pepa's head shot up and she looked at her mother with an angry surprise.

Dolores said "But they weren't really, I didn't hear them doing anything".

Antonio asked "Can I go too?"

And Papa stood up and said "This is unfair to the children, Senora," in a very tight voice.

Papa *never* called Abuela "Senora". Never, ever. He had to be furious...!

And Mirabel sighed, pushed her chair away and said, very loudly - much louder than she intended - "At least she will not have you check the quality of *their* wool, right, Milo?"

And that made everyone shut up - with Isabela going red and Mariano just blinking, confused.

"What did you say?" her eldest sister hissed.

"Well, she was just talking about your potential offspring being healthy and strong, and inheriting the best traits from both sides, right? That's the exact way she described the plan for next season's sheep when she ordered Camilo to check for the wool quality. Which *I* did, by the way, because *he* knows nothing about wool. Sorry sis, but I suppose you'd rather have full knowledge of what Abuela is aiming at with this thing here."

"I—" her sister looked lost for words. "What are you...? Healthy offspring? Sheep?"

"Yep. She used nearly the same words, and I think the verb 'breeding' was mentioned, so... Up to you how you interpret this."

Once that was said, there wasn't much that could be done to fix the situation, but Isabela suddenly hissing "I will not be your prize ewe!" at their Abuela definitely did not make it any better. The unsaid, but still rather clear implication that in that setting Mariano was a stud ram was just the frosting on the cake.

Mirabel was certainly in for a stern talking-to in the morning, or maybe even a huge shouting rant, but for the moment, suddenly wrapped in Isabela's rose-scented embrace, and with her hermana's shakily whispered "thank you", she couldn't care less.

End Notes

Update note: This is a oneshot, lovelies :) I don't have any ideas for a followup, I'm afraid. (but I do have another story or two brewing, just need to wait for them to get into better shape)

Dear heavens. Someone made a [tvtropes page](#) of this ;)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!